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*Latour and Eighteenth-Century Literary Studies*

-- Christina Lupton and Sean Silver with Adam Sneed

1. Latour and the Question of History

Almost every major theorist read in English departments over the last three decades has touched base with the eighteenth century. Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas, Foucault, Said, and Derrida all lay special weight upon the period as one from which we must break away or make our peace. Latour joins this influential list of scholars for whom the Enlightenment remains key to understanding, and perhaps to overcoming, the modern terms of existence. The argument for which he is best known, that the distinction between subject and object is the lie on which modernity is based, traces that lie to the long eighteenth century. It was here, Latour notes, that distinctions between mind and matter, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, were worked out in the first place. In this light, a special issue on Latour's relevance to eighteenth-century literature follows a trajectory that Latour himself endorses.

The eighteenth century has been seen by many as registering a break between, on the one hand, a confidence in the integrity of the modern subject, and, on the other, a serene satisfaction with the concreteness of the modern object. This is, in Latour's project, the place where modernity got off track. Latour's sense of the vibrant primacy of networks of persons and things, of the co-implication of humans and non-humans in collectives, is designed to stitch up this gap. But it also reminds us that the image of the eighteenth century as a site of their separation is merely a caricature. Latour invites us to revisit the early decades of modernity as a period actively feeling its way through the manifold crossings between persons and things, sometimes attempting to disentangle them, but also often not. It is with this sense of productive

possibility, of the recovery of paths taken or not, opportunities accepted or declined, that this collection makes its return to the literature of the 1700s.

Yet it remains true that Latour's style of thought, aside from sweeping gestures towards "modernity" or "empiricism," is relatively resistant to historical narrative. Precisely the things that make it original as a brand of theory also make it more difficult to parse as relevant to historians. Upon first reading, for instance, most of Latour's work seems invested in the close, latitudinal description of networks. His influential Actor-Network Theory is dedicated to offering the tools making analysis of these networks possible. This attention to the precise textures of productive exchanges between "actants" is one aspect of his work that has made it compelling for literary scholars; the tools he provides remind us of the productive ways that literary texts themselves produce meaning through networks of signs, concepts, and materials, even while being embedded, in their turn, in productive networks of which books, ideas, and authors may be equally small parts. More than one essay in this collection invests itself in unpacking the stakes of a particular moment, of an object, poem, or mode of being as the particular sedimentation of such a nexus of relationships.

Arguably, however, this latitudinal or synchronic tendency presents an obstacle to the long stories that Latour wants to tell, and that authorize the peculiar importance of the eighteenth century to his thought. Focused attention on the "mode of existence" that Latour has recently named **[net]** for "Network," can rule out ways of thinking about history as the development of ideas or institutions over time.<sup>1</sup> Latour's fine-grained analyses of laboratory practices, the analysis of pasteurization that showed what was possible with this approach, or his strangely compelling "scientifiction" of a Paris-based personal rapid transit system, all produce such effects

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, 2013).

of embedded presentness that it is hard to imagine tracing these delicate structures for more than a few years, months, or, in some cases, even days.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Serres, the philosopher who became one of Latour's most important early interlocutors, makes the point that Latour's accounts appear stiff when aspiring to capture changes and shifts in networks over time. In this context, Serres discounts the project of reducing a network to its actants, likening such an undertaking to describing a rugby match in which the players don't move. An alternative model would have to take into account the motion of the players themselves, reintroducing time in such a way that, as Latour himself suggests in conversation with Serres, "synthesis would come about in the area of passes, of movement, and not in the area of objects." This would involve tracing the ball as the center of a shifting field, with the teams placing themselves around it, playing off the ball and the ball playing off them. Or it would mean, as Serres puts it in his particularly mobile style, tracing human history as a sheet of flame, coming from somewhere, oriented towards an emptiness, joining together, fragmenting, dying out. "Networks," Serres insists, "leave an image in space that is almost too stable... [I]f you immerse it in time, this network is going to fluctuate, become very unstable, and bifurcate endlessly."<sup>3</sup>

In Jonathan Lamb's account of the difference between Latour and Serres in this volume, Latour's reluctance to let go of the ball means that Serres, who holds time much more firmly in view, remains the more pathfinding historian of the two. Although Latour has the stronger investment in junctures where representation and primary experience merge—an investment that aligns him interestingly with Hume, and with Lucretius—this means that he forsakes an account of the way representation

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<sup>2</sup> Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, 1986); Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, 1988); *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, 1993); and Latour, *Aramis: or The Love of Technology* (Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, transl. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor, 1995), 109.

cuts through time, shortcuts space. By analogy, the piece of paper that can be laid out flat, like a map with criss-crossing lines, can also be crumpled up so that points far distant are made to meet in unexpected configurations.<sup>4</sup> It is Serres, perhaps along with Deleuze, who is left to make the case for time in this way, not as a clean layering of moments one upon another, but as a muddling of temporalities.

As Lamb points out, however, Latour's project over the last 25 years—beginning with *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), and continuing, in its most mature form, right up to his *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013)—can in some ways be seen as his response to these critiques, casting light upon how much of his recent work has been interested precisely in the problem of history. Broadly speaking, we may say that Latour invites the historical back into his work along two routes. In the first form, he is interested in how the past is embedded in particular instances: gestures, habits, tools, and texts. In its simplest form, he tends to prefer accounts of history as they may be elicited from particular technologies—that is, the way that practices, paired with gadgets, evolve with reference to each other. This is what Latour, in his most recent monograph, calls **[REP]**, for “reproduction”: the persistence of a thing across the risky leaps it makes to “reproduce” itself.<sup>5</sup> Something like a sea-chart, Latour notes, is the accretion of techniques and insights of an array of former mariners and their instruments; it represents, in this sense, the distillation of an age of wisdom, knowing far more than any single person who could compose it.<sup>6</sup> Under the right conditions, speed bumps, seat belts, and door closers all flash into significance as the sedimentations of evolving relationships over time.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Latour, *Modes of Existence*, 99-110

<sup>6</sup> Latour first poses this example in “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Hands and Eyes,” *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* 6 (1986): 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Latour, “Where are the Missing Masses: The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical*

But in its more advanced form, Latour rules out what he (after Serres) calls “laminar” time, the geological strata of one period building on another while remaining absolutely distinct. Actants call for a theory of “turbulent” time, of the present tumbled up with the past. A carpenter (Latour suggests) carries an electric drill, but he also carries a hammer; the electric drill is one of the latest gadgets, but the hammer is among the oldest—and in any case the drill too contains a series of levers, wheels and axles, inclined planes, everything oriented to drive a screw, the most primitive sorts of machines mixed up with the latest.<sup>8</sup> Latour in effect invites history actively into the network.

This brings us back to the first way of imagining the importance of the eighteenth century to Latour’s project, and the importance of Latour to the eighteenth century, albeit from an angle that enmeshes past and present. The Enlightenment, Latour argues, is roughly as far back as modern networks can be usefully traced. Latour therefore stumbles on a problem that has been pressing to scholars in the field of eighteenth century studies for some time, which is simply the question of how long the long eighteenth century had ought to be. This is a disciplinary question, to which we suppose that the answer is the eighteenth century must expand and contract as it becomes differently enmeshed in different networks of actants. In other words, Latour asks us to envision the present moment as continually, differently tangled up with the eighteenth century, our investments as existing in complex exchange with orders of actants long absent or far distant. As Sean Silver points out, in his essay in this collection, this means that small bits of the eighteenth century are continually turning up in our own; we may, as Silver notes, locate, in a small, habitual gesture employed by Latour himself, a small scrap of the thought of Robert Hooke. What is

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*Change* (Cambridge, 1992): 225-58; Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, 1999): 174-215.

<sup>8</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 75.

more, we may indeed trace a whole way of thinking, and a way of coordinating subject and object, thinker and tool—in this case, the thesis of “extended cognition”—from Latour back to Hooke. The past, in this way, is not cut off from the present. As Joseph Roach notes in a similar context, we should be thinking of the eighteenth century not as a “long” one, but as a “*deep*” one. The deep eighteenth century is “the one that isn’t over yet”; it is “not merely a period of time, but a kind of time,” which continues to bubble up into our own—whether we are looking for it or not.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. From Science Studies to ANT

The second way that Latour addresses history is through a subtler, though often more sweeping, claim about the way we address the world. The first way of looking at history is to analyse the debts of the past in actants of the present. The second way is to trace much broader ways of being in the world, as they have evolved in the world. This is what, in his latest monograph, he calls a “mode of existence,” a batch of different ways of being that became split from one another around the time of the beginning of the Enlightenment. In its earliest form, this cluster of modes is simply what Latour calls “modernity,” a structure of avowal and disavowal that cuts across space and time, but which nevertheless continues to make seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe strangely present. The long eighteenth century has a special significance for this project, for it was then, in Latour’s account, that modernity’s particular species of complicit denial may best be said to have begun. This is the case Latour makes in *We Have Never Been Modern*, kicking off his demonstration of the paradox of modernity with a return to Restoration London.

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor, 2007), 13.

Latour directs our attention to the paper debates between Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle, so elegantly unpacked by Simon Schaffer and Steven Shapin.<sup>10</sup> Boyle, whose laboratory is an important site in this account, was one of the first champions of the “fact,” species of which his laboratory was invented to isolate. But he was, Latour notes, perhaps more importantly an innovator in mobilizing vast forces, technological achievements, and hosts of colleagues to produce this seemingly self-sufficient modern institution. More than anything else, the modern fact dramatizes the peculiar double-move of modernity; produced through remarkable technical inventions, networks of mutual attestation, huge outlays of capital, and so forth, it is nevertheless offered as though it were simply discovered, untouched by the forces that produced it.<sup>11</sup>

Here, then, is a plausible fountainhead for the peculiar blindness of the modern moment: science is seemingly split from society, created as its own overpowerful and autonomous system, at the same time that this apparent autonomy is accomplished through deeper and deeper entanglements. Hobbes, for his part, was at the same time insisting on the absolute truth of the social system, what he called the Leviathan. Just as Boyle’s fact was buttressed by disavowing the social complexity required to summon it up, so Hobbes was deliberately ignoring the historical evidence that Leviathan needed to prop itself up. This double-move, the society of mutual witnessing disavowing itself as a network, and the network disavowing the role of mutual witnessing, characterises truth telling as one of the modes that in Latour’s account begins in the late seventeenth century but remains with us today. In its most recent form, it is what Latour calls [DC] for “double-

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, 1993), 13-29.



click.”<sup>12</sup> This is what, according to Latour, Boyle’s strategy of disavowed mutuality (or its symmetrical opposite) looks like in the computer age.

We may say, then, that analysis of technological networks of the sort in Boyle’s laboratory form the ground and fountainhead for Latour’s later theoretical contributions. As ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, so Latour’s own career repeats what he describes happening in a long historical view. Latour did his apprenticeship in the sociology of science in the ‘70s. His first work in this line was a series of striking ethnographies of laboratory life; this he expanded into more sweeping considerations of how laboratories produce knowledge.<sup>13</sup> But his career was shaped during the so-called “Science Wars,” an academic conflict in the nineties between a loose group of concerned scientists and a range of postmodern critics. When the lines were drawn between, on the one hand, caricatures of the academic left, and, on the other, misrepresentations of scientific community on the relative right, Latour was positioned to notice the categorical impasse as part of a greater regime of dualist thinking.<sup>14</sup> Put differently, Latour was positioned to argue that the objectivism of the right, just like the relativism of the left, were each and equally the effects of networks. What was needed, according to Latour’s way of thinking, was a reinvigoration of sensitivity to the ways that knowledge is made. Science could insist on facts that speak themselves, even while employing more and more sophisticated technologies to elicit them; Poststructuralism could insist on the primacy of discourse, even while embedding that discourse in vast networks of persons, institutions, and things. Viewed at a very coarse-grained level, each was engaged in the same pattern of purification and hybridization; each was mistaking the outcome (facts, conversation

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<sup>12</sup> Latour, *Modes of Existence*, 199.

<sup>13</sup> Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (New York, 1979); Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Especially in *Pandora’s Hope* (1999).

without end) as the process, while each was embedded in a world constituted in part by what appeared to be its opposite. This was, of course, what Latour had already witnessed in the paper-wars between Hobbes and Boyle.

In his subsequent series of studies, Latour's commitment was to finding a way out of this bind by laying the accusation of "modernism" equally at the feet of social constructionist and empirical scientist. What emerged was the general set of observations called "Actor-Network Theory," formalized in *Reassembling the Social* (2005).<sup>15</sup> Here is a set of tools, a way of thinking through institutions as the offspring of networks of actants, which could be applied much more generally in cultural study. As Latour himself notes, in his most mature, syncretic work, "the very notion of network (this time in the sense of the Actor-Network Theory) cut its teeth, as it were, on the foregoing domain of technology"; the paradoxical disavowals of the sort encountered in the example of the carpenter, in other words, provided the basic pattern for Latour's more programmatic theory of actor-networks.<sup>16</sup> The way forward, in these terms, is not a "dialectic" of modernity, which would sacrifice the middle ground of meaning-making networks. The way out is to discover that we have never been modern, that the claims of modernity were frustrated by their constitution from the outset.

Despite the waning of the oppositional thinking that provided the ground for Latour's account of modernity (science versus postmodernism, objectivity versus relativism, and so on) Latour has not ceased to remain important in the field of science and technology studies. He has also helped developed sets of theoretical tools that have become powerful in historical, cultural, and literary analysis. These in general involve the broadening of horizons to include things that we take for granted

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<sup>15</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Latour, *Modes of Existence*, 212.

(ideas, objects, techniques, and so forth) as involved in the networks of actants that make them possible. From a particular kind of network—what Latour calls [TEC] for “Technology”—we raise our view to a broader, more encompassing mode of existence, [NET], which is the awareness of our existence as embedded in “Networks.” In the embrace of the network, facts can be studied alongside spirits and mountains and laws as ontologically indistinct from each other. This ontological flattening is akin, Latour argues, to opening up a black box—to revealing what is congealed in the elements of a process normally left tacit or invisible.

The opening-up of black-boxes: this is what we have attempted, in a brief way, to do with Actor-Network Theory itself. We have attempted to reveal its tools as themselves the sedimentation of certain historical networks coming into contact: science studies, discourse analysis, extended cognition, and so on. And this returns us precisely to the second, related way that the eighteenth century remains critical in Latour’s account. On the one hand, it is by discovering the Enlightenment in present-day gestures, thoughts, media, tools, and techniques that Latour is able to discuss things like discourse or facts in their particular ecologies. But this provides the background for a more general consideration of the ways we have ceased to be able to talk to each other: the modes of existence that divide left from right in the same way that they divided Hobbes from Boyle. Put differently, the “modes” constitute the second way that Latour takes account of temporality and history, for these modes are flexible ways of being, linking and unlinking, coming from somewhere and going towards something else, but always in motion as they come into contact. And their radical dissimilarity, the way that one mode of being (like the law) cannot recognize

the truth of others (like religion), is by Latour's account a legacy of the eighteenth century—of being “modern.”<sup>17</sup>

Latour's theory of modes may be formalized in “pivot table” at the end of *The Inquiry* but his narrative sets them motion. Thus, Latour remarks that modes are, in the end, defined by the sort of “passes” they authorize. A mode is, in this sense, precisely a way of being in the world that causes things to appear to be continuous or seamless with one another, in spite of the many discontinuities and differences that must exist; modes are the ways that different networks appear to be no networks at all. Put differently modes are the continual and evolving ways that allow things to “pass” within the elements of a network. In its simplest form, Latour remarks, these “passes” are akin to “a passing shot in basketball.” A certain phenomenon (like a fact) is witnessed to emerge out of the many functional elements (actants) inside and outside a laboratory; something like a vacuum may pass from an air pump, a pamphlet, to the discourse of witnesses, and so on. Specific representations, Latour notes, “pass” from one medium to another. This is the essence of **[REP]**. But, going himself one better, Latour insists that **[REP]** (the reproduction of a phenomenon across actants) is a special form of a more general phenomenon, and to grasp the way that modes work, we must in the end rid ourselves of the notion that “*something* is passed in the pass,” as Latour puts it, parenthetically, “(like a rugby ball).”<sup>18</sup> In the end, he notes, “there are only passes,” the transformation of belief and ways of being. “Law” flows through a legal network, passing between actants, without a specific thing making the rounds; faith flows through a religious network, passing between actants, in a different way, but also without something specific doing the passing.

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<sup>17</sup> Law and religion are brought into contact by Latour in his *Modes of Existence*, 38-43.

<sup>18</sup> “Pass” is one of the many terms in the *Inquiry into the Modes of Existence* that receives from Latour a technical definition in the online version of the book. It is here that the *Inquiry* returns us to Serres's example. See “pass, passage,” in <http://www.modesofexistence.org/crossings/#/en/voc>. Accessed 9/12/2014.

These “passes,” taken together, constitute what Latour calls a “trajectory,” etymologically a “throw beyond” or “passing through”; the forms of these passes define the essence of modes as they evolve or are thrown from one moment in their many histories towards their futures. Modes, in other words, are ephemeral things that may nevertheless be said to have persisted from the eighteenth century to the present.

Registering our debts in these networks—and the modes they imply—therefore occupies a major part of Latour’s work, one that continually asks us to revisit the eighteenth century’s legacy. One particularly fruitful concept Latour has developed in this context is that of *iconoclash*, which Joseph Drury describes in his essay below as the “interpretive uncertainty” that follows an act of iconoclasm. Following Latour, Drury takes iconoclasm to be another characteristically modern act that “takes aim not so much at particular objects but at a way of thinking about objects that the Moderns find intolerable” (tk). That way of thinking about objects, we have suggested above, involves acknowledging and appreciating their role in the mediation and construction of reality. The trouble with iconoclasm, Latour suggests, is that the hammer always “strikes sideways” — that is, the act of iconoclasm always exposes some unforeseen network of connections or results in some unintended consequence. Just as modes themselves straddle the eighteenth century and the present, so Drury employs Latour’s recent concept of *iconoclash* to explain the ambivalent treatment of iconoclasm in Matthew Gregory Lewis’ gothic novel *The Monk* (1796). A return to this moment helps more generally to illuminate the gothic’s ambivalent position both within and without religious institutions. Among its many functions, the gothic is able to see religious institutions as, on the one hand, antiquated and corrupt social institutions in need of rational exposure and, on the other, indispensable forms of social stabilization and supplementation in a modern

society. The gothic, for the way it crosses religion (REL) and law (LAW), would appear to be an early version of an inquiry into modes of existence.

### 3. Actor Networks and the Humanities

For many in the humanities, Latour's writings resonate with the raft of arguments buoying up the appeal of things, objects, and a new, non-dialectical materialist strand of thinking. Undoubtedly, there has been a wide surge of interest in the way that cultural history can be written from less anthropocentric perspectives, and just as the eighteenth century is, by Latour's account, critical to the reconstruction of modernity, so too scholars of eighteenth-century literature and culture have been key to recovering the work of things in culture. The very different work of such scholars as Jonathan Lamb, Sandra MacPherson, and Lynn Festa has found that objects in eighteenth-century literature served, even in the age of objectivity and reason, as primary models of attachment and irrationality. They join an even wider range of scholars focusing on the autotelic affordances of objects themselves, on the way things move with their own intentions or actions, as something eighteenth-century writers and recognised, often in terms we are having to relearn today in recognition of our ongoing and increasingly evident involvement with the planet on which we live. Taken together, this work constitutes a major revision of the way we understand Enlightenment modes and investments, for, like Latour's project, this body of work means to complicate the Enlightenment's own legacy.

Still more germane to literary study is the way that scholars have invoked language as summoning up a world rich in lifelike things; the "objects being spoken of," Latour himself remarks of this tendency, "become reality effects gliding over the

surface of writing.”<sup>19</sup> It is no surprise in this light to find Belinda’s hair, Robinson Crusoe’s arsenal of objects, or the narrators of it-narratives quicken at the same moment as the genres and physical forms of novel, pamphlet, page. In concert with more theoretical approaches disavowing the ontological centrality of the human and the linguistic, Latour’s work, along with work in the realm of Thing Theory and Object Orientated Ontology, seems to promise that even studies of representation might bypass language and thought *as representation* to look directly at the actions and effects of the material things it endows with life, and of the letters and surfaces that give it its own material substratum. It is on these grounds, for instance, that Latour’s work found a home in Bill Brown’s *Things* (2003), the closest document to a manifesto in the literary thing-theoretical line—a volume that is incidentally over-represented with scholars in eighteenth-century literature and culture.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth remembering, however, that Latour has all along attempted, through different routes and strategies, to disavow the primal differences between object and subject, thing and person. Latour’s role in the larger conversations around “Things” in literature can be usefully qualified if we think more closely about his refusal to see the object as occupying a distinct category of its own. As we have seen, for Latour, the Enlightenment has enslaved us to the myth of the separation between object and subject. Dialectical models, he insists, have only perpetuated the myth of their separation. In their place, he describes nodes where objects and subjects merge: the writer and her pen, the speed bump and the driver who slows down become amalgams of human and non-human parts where change occurs. His most plangent appeals revolve around a set of such neologisms adapted variously from Gabriel

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<sup>19</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 63.

<sup>20</sup> Brown’s 2001 special issue of *Critical Inquiry* was republished as Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago, 2003). Also in *Things* are essays by Daniel Tiffany, Jonathan Lamb, Jessica Riskin, and Matthew L. Jones (on Descartes).

Tarde, and others: the actant, but also the hybrid, the quasi-object and quasi-subject, “things” in the word’s deepest and most inclusive senses.<sup>21</sup>

From a literary perspective, it is significant that Latour does not blame language for concealing these entities from us. The semiotic turn in philosophy and criticism may work to obscure the many crossings between commensurate actants, but language itself continually announces their presence. In speech we readily describe the book that writes itself, the climate that changed, the girl who flew to China, implying that we acknowledge a range of events that originate in neither human nor technical causes. The cultural peculiarity of the moderns is that we have invested authority in the disciplines, modes, and institutions that erect and patrol artificial distinctions between the constructed and the empirical; the social and the physical; the document and the word processor; the discussion and the building that houses and enables it. While we live in and speak of a reality that does not support these distinctions, we create ways to carry on as if they were tenable. The anthropologist of the moderns, channelled in the *Inquiry* as female, must make the actants and hybrids with which we unofficially live visible again. She has language on her side in this quest.

Thus, while Thing Theory, Object Orientated Ontology and the various brands of New Materialism can all be used against the linguistic turn in the humanities in their own way, Latour’s ontological pluralism—his insistence that there is no real distinction between subjects and objects, both of which can be constructions *and* agents of change—has a number of particular implications when it comes to reading literature. The first of these involves the sanction Latour lends to tracking—and the inspiration he draws from finding—characters or objects that refuse in terms of their

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance the concluding chapter of *We Have Never Been Modern*. On Latour and Tarde, see Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social,” in *The Social in Question*, ed. Patrick Joyce (New York, 2001), 117-32.



fictional representation to belong exclusively to either the human or non-human world. Latour himself has argued that figuration features a model case of making the hybrid perceptible in the recognised cultural sphere of literature.<sup>22</sup> Lamb's work on the way objects inspire many of the categories associated with political and colonial violence in the eighteenth century also takes its cues from Latour, who licenses Lamb's ground breaking approach to the discourses, for instance, of sovereignty and freedom, being rooted in the recognition of the way objects behave.<sup>23</sup> Festa has claimed an equal porosity of the world of human attachment and sentiment, politics to object and animal as actor and subject.<sup>24</sup> And Macpherson, working in the same period, looks at plots as having the status of material forms, with fictional tragedies being more invested in contingency than in human responsibility.<sup>25</sup>

These studies, which see literary language as cooperative with, but not as entirely responsible for, the conflation of subject and object, can be distinguished from those associated more closely with Thing Theory. For Thing Theory, to use a hypothetical example, a pair of swimming goggles that floats to the surface of a pool in the first lines of story might be read as uncannily displacing the appearance of a swimmer. But the whole scenario would be closely connected to the question of literary representation, where things signify rather than act. "Things," argues Brown, appear in texts where objects are "made to mean."<sup>26</sup> Thing Theory is concerned with the way representation endows objects with forms of agency originally human. Looking for them involves a methodological decision; a paying of attention to language rather than to the world with which it cannot intersect.

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<sup>22</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Sandra Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago University Press, 2004), 17.

For those working with Latour, however, the site of interest is the conjunction of the swimmer who, while wearing the goggles, embodies the ability to swim differently, and the goggles, who when wearing the swimmer, acquire the ability to move. While the swimmer-goggle entity eludes many of the categories of scientific and empirical description within which we are taught to think, fiction can plausibly honour its existence. Fiction is predisposed towards doing so partly because its modes, metaphors and materiality are also entities of this kind. Books teach us that words move us; figures we make can become forces in their own right; genres themselves enable and constrain emotional change. But the role of literary language is not constitutive here in the way it is for the arguments of Brown, for whom fiction works in special ways to solicit this breakdown of subject or object, or for Elaine Freedgood, for whom figurative language intersects uneasily with the social and economic entanglement of a wide range of objects.<sup>27</sup> Literary language, for Latour, is the rule rather than the exception, and the objects of fiction are native to rather than special agents in the world.

In terms of eighteenth-century studies, taking up Latour's method directly – rather than as a general invitation to think about objects – can therefore mean thinking quite deeply about literature in its own historical and material formation. Books function here less as media of representation than as ways of situating language in a wider network of exchange between people and things. Miruna Stanica's "Portraits of Delegation" offers an argument about eighteenth-century objects (a lock) and texts (it-narratives) carefully defined in its debt to Latour, rather than to thing theory. For Stanica, the point is not to see these as cases where objects are endowed, either practically or imaginatively, with life, but to track their role in a web of relationships that runs multi-directionally between people and objects in patterns that defy causal

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<sup>27</sup> Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago, 2006).

explanation or human origin. Courtney Weiss Smith, on the other hand, engages in her essay on Anne Finch's "Upon the Hurricane" quite directly with literary language. Her account of the poem involves what we might traditionally recognise as a close reading in a tribute to the particular power of poetics to remake the world. Yet, while Smith's piece explores figure, personification and metaphor, her sense of the interconnectedness of people and things in Finch's description of a storm unleashed is insistent upon the possibility of this language effecting crossings that are already there in Finch's experience. Her real focus is on the way that Finch's poem and its author find their own place in a natural world by which categories such as figure are allowed and given power. The poem itself benefits from this reading as something that can be understood as part of a "storm" of media effects neither more nor less real than the weather.

#### 4. The Importance of Fiction

Literature has frequently appeared, then, as an important category for Latour in explicating the conflation of the human and the material that modernity is inclined to overlook. But it is really only with the *Inquiry* that we are told that "Fiction" is a "mode" central to descriptions of the world—including Latour's own.<sup>28</sup> The centrality of FIC is forcefully spelt out when it is placed alongside Law, Politics, Religion and other the modes operative in our making partial sense of the world. These modes, Laas we've seen above, are both created by and creative of us. They funnel our actions and are made up of them. They rely upon objects, and are created through them, but are most commonly characterised by their denial of this. Their continuation over time and across a network is always the work of belief as well as of

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<sup>28</sup> Fiction is the subject of the ninth chapter of *Modes of Existence*, 233-58.

practical activity; the mountain, as much as the philosopher or the novel is the product of this “back and forth movement” that creates the illusion of continuity and a perceptible empirical domain. In support of this illusion, Latour’s modes operate through “instauration,” using modes of “veridiction” that distinguish them from and relate them to other modes; each mode differently relates to an external world on which they generally claim to report.<sup>29</sup>

Fiction stands out in Latour’s line up of modes, not because it works differently from others, but because it is better than other modes at explicating the operation that they all deploy. Although fiction is ideational, it explicitly depends on raw material (books, screens, props). It needs work: of FIC, Latour writes, we know “you have to keep holding it so that it will hold you.”<sup>30</sup> It supplies its own points of reference: it doesn’t pretend to report back on an external world:

Here we have a mode like no other, defined by hesitation, vacillation, back-and-forth movements, the establishment of resonance between the successive layers of raw material from which are drawn provisionally figurations that nevertheless cannot separate themselves from the material.<sup>31</sup>

Now in Latour’s terms, the same could be said of Law or Politics. But it is not innate to these modes to acknowledge that props or screens or books enable their operation; nor to suggest that imaginative or emotional labour feeds their existence. Although factual narratives rely just as strongly in Latour’s terms on imagination, figuration and materiality, their perversion is to cultivate the impression that they draw their

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<sup>29</sup> Latour, *Modes of Existence*, 53-66.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 244.

resources and their confirmation directly from reality.<sup>32</sup> And yet, starting from the same basic and raw material, fictional and factual modes differ through the treatment to which we subject them—fiction carries us “away” whereas other factual narratives are tied by chains of reference to the world on which they report.<sup>33</sup>

This means, to return to our earlier discussion of Latour’s historicity, that narrative becomes an important tool in the critic’s own workshop. Latour himself evinces a powerful tendency towards narrative, for it is in tracing modes of existence that Latour mobilizes his most sweeping fictions. The problem is to isolate a way of speaking about networks, without getting lost in complicated folds; likewise, the problem is to tell the story of modes of existence, without getting seduced by their special ways of being. Just as, in the case of networks, there is no *a priori* way to close them off—no limit to the potential backing up that would need to be done—so, with modes, there is no way to distinguish the analytic apparatus from the world it describes. What is needed to capture the work of networks is a good story, something with a beginning, middle, and end: a bildungsroman; an it-narrative. This is why, for Latour, [FIC] means to take seriously the reality of the networks that spring up around imaginary beings and works of art. It is through [FIC] that we can make sense of modernity in the first place—a fact that helps account for Latour’s many fictions: the Constitution he imagines for modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern*; his whole approach to transit networks in *Aramis*; and the general plot and structure of his *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, which is either a procedural mystery, a Faustian romance, or the coming-of-age novel of a young anthropologist, depending upon how you look at it. There is no villain more villainous than Latour’s “Double-Click,” the personified impulse to disavow one’s own investments. To make any headway at all in Latour’s work, we must in other words willingly inhabit the realm of [FIC]. We

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 249.

must accept that [DC] (“Double-Click”) exists, not as a personification, but just like any devil or djinn; this is how his *Inquiry* proceeds. For [FIC] is the engine that makes visible the beings of modernity, its many modes summoned up as its villains and heroes.

With Latour’s definition of [FIC] in mind, we can situate the way in which William Warner argues below for the applicability of Latour, not to the reading of any particular eighteenth-century text, but to the way in which the novel is understood. Eighteenth-century fictions, he suggests, are routinely deemed immature because they conflate reality and fiction at a fairly crude level, for instance by using paratexts and fictional editors to complicate the question of their authenticity. If, Warner suggests, we take Latour’s descriptions of [FIC] fully as a descriptions of a process, we might see this, not as a failure of these novels to arrive at a fully fledged state of being fiction, but as their willingness to refuse the distinction between fiction and reality. Fiction in these terms would be a way of handling reality that allows us to concede that even the most sublime or elevating experience arises from material conditions (Harry Potter can feel real and be switched off at the push of a button); a way of handling the things we make is no less real for being made. We know, for instance, that the life of fictional characters depends on us making room for them, allowing them to be. [FIC] would be defined here not as a make-believe universe or parallel reality, but as being at its most developed. [FIC] is a meta-mode that facilitates awareness of the way all modes swing back and forth between subject and object.

In this collection, then, are the seeds of a much larger project, changing the way we describe the horizon and telos not just of forms like the novel, but of eighteenth-century thought generally. The claims mooted here would, if taken seriously, have us rethink the way in which the university today is divided up; it

would realign literary-historical criticism with much more “scientific” disciplines. And it would do this both as we heed Lamb’s warning about Latour’s collapse of fiction into the world, even while we recognize, with Warner, the capacity for fiction to make manifest passes between things that modern modes hold apart. Finally, as we have been arguing, the study of eighteenth-century literature would matter in this project as the preeminent site for a rapprochement; it is the place where the history of modernity, one that we have come commonly to think of as one of division, might be recast as one of inseparability. While the essays in this collection do not exhaust this project—how could they?—they each offer signposts in its direction.